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Play Ball!

Ah, springtime...the umpires yelling “PLAY BALL!”...the crack of the bat...really that first spark of hope...maybe there is an end to winter...an inkling that spring has finally arrived...a very welcome arrival.

This is the best time of year to be a Cub fan, since we are all full of hope. Our noses are glued to the sports pages, as those more knowledgeable prophesize the coming season, divining the clubhouse mix, and forecasting player performance.

Cub manager Dusty Baker proclaimed everyone is ready to play ball. They all came to spring training ready to play, hit, throw, catch, pitch, and run their fastest. “This year we are going to work on *fundamentals*,” he said. Doing those little things right...hitting, bunting, catching...doing the little things right.

These guys are pros, making big bucks. Working on fundamentals, doing the little things right? This is their job, shouldn't they know that stuff already? “Keep your eye on the ball” is what Dad used to say, “and swing.” No wonder there are so few Hank Aarons. They used to say, “Trying to sneak a pitch past Hank Aaron is like trying to sneak a sunrise past a rooster.” Must have had something to do with fundamentals.

Batting is a mystery to most. Eye on the ball, swing, grunt, loud swooshing sound...and the slap of leather as the ball strikes the catcher's mitt. Oh, there is the occasional hit. Yet, some people can do it and do it often enough to make big, big bucks. Imagine being good enough to hit behind the runner...on purpose...is that really possible? Fundamentals. Could they be the secret to success?

We have all made those life-changing discoveries of fundamentals. That yellow and green when mixed, make blue. Then we were introduced to the color wheel. People already knew this about colors. The color wheel, knowledge prepackaged, a way to understand colors, shades and compatibility. There was no need to reinvent the wheel, already done, ready to be used.

Disaster, Success, Change

It has been like that in our business as well. Try something, discard, try again, tinker, start over. Disaster, success, change. We have learned about growing a business as we experimented; starts, stops, and staggers. There were many mistakes that could

have been avoided if we had just known the fundamentals, but we just worked trying to reinvent the wheel.

Interviewing is like that as well. People give the worst advice in the world to interviewers, and they offer it over and over again. “Just take what you learn and use the things that fit your personality, discard the rest.” People say that so they do not have to change. It seems to us that when you are putting something together and have parts left over, it might not run as well as it could. Keep your eye on the ball, swing.

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For example, have you ever trained someone? You are clearly presenting the fundamentals of the task, offering those incredible insights to success, providing all the information necessary to do the job correctly, and your charge interrupts, “Well, at my old company we used to...” What follows is a dissertation of what he used to do in his past life, which may or, more likely, may not be useful to the current discussion. At this point he does not know enough to offer something of value or to even know he is wrong.

On the other hand, if he clearly understood the company's policies and practices, had a handle on the subtle nuances of the task, then there could be real value to the discussion.

Not many of us will ever make a momentous discovery, but those that do built their work on fundamentals that allow them to make that incredible intuitive leap to the next step. It is always with the grasp of the basics...“standing on the shoulders of giants”...that we are able to make that leap. Maybe some of the parts were not needed after all, or they could be assembled differently.

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Hitting a Home Run

It is like the assumptive question that has been around for over thirty years that many interviewers still insist on using: "When was the last time you caused a loss at the company?" This question does not work well and gives a predictable response that rarely benefits the interviewer. Almost always the subject responds with something like, "Well, maybe I damaged something by accident when I was cutting open a box." It hardly ever causes the subject to make an admission to theft, which is what the interviewer had intended. Here is what happens:

- First the subject has to decide what is meant by the word "loss." Does the interviewer mean stealing cash or is he referring to merchandise theft or maybe he is fishing and doesn't know anything.
- Next, after picking a category, the subject has to consider what he has stolen and the amount.
- Next he has to decide whether to make an admission to the theft of cash or the merchandise.
- Then he has to consider whether he wants to tell the interviewer what he has stolen.
- The subject takes the path of least resistance making some innocuous admission that means nothing.
- Finally, the subject talks about the meaningless admission leading the interviewer away from the relevant admission.
- The interviewer must now reassert control of the conversation and bring the subject back to the topic.

This is a predictable outcome that does not benefit the interviewer. While the subject's example of "loss" might change, its significance as an admission will not. Eye on the ball, swing, and...slap of leather as the ball hits the catcher's glove.

On the other hand, by asking a more targeted assumptive question, the interviewer reinforces the subject's belief that his guilt is known, simplifies the individual's decision making, and obtains a significant admission. If the subject has stolen both money and merchandise, the interviewer might ask, "What was the most amount of money you took in any single day?" Here is what happens in this case:

- Because the assumptive question is specific to cash theft, but is not method specific, the subject's mind is directed to the broad category of cash theft.
- The subject thinks what that amount of cash would be, but is interrupted by the interviewer before he thinks about whether or not to say anything.
- The interviewer interrupts the subject's thought process with a follow-up question that exaggerates the possible loss. "Could it have been a \$1,000?"
- The follow-up question triggers a denial by the subject that is an actual admission.
- The interviewer supports the subject's admission and moves in to develop the admission.

Eye on the ball, swing, and...crack of the bat. Hank Aaron would be proud. It's really just about fundamentals. ■



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